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SUBJECT: VIETNAM INTERNET: NEW CHANNELS FOR MEDIA AND POLITICAL
DIALOGUE

REF: HCMC 334; B) HCMC 318; C) HCMC 214; D) HCMC 229; E) HANOI 628; F)H
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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Internet use in HCMC and other towns -- small and large -- in Vietnam is expanding dramatically. Although the GVN has established a tight regulatory and technical framework to control the Internet, its impact on use and access appears relatively muted thus far. Political and religious dissidents based in HCMC and Hue increasingly are using the internet to coordinate positions and to keep the outside world aware of -- and able to respond to -- police harassment. Even "regular" Vietnamese are turning to blogs and private forums to express their discontent with elements of the Communist Party's performance and ideology. The Party is struggling to balance the recognition that Vietnam must have a robust Internet to fuel economic growth with the threat that increased access to information and ideas has on the Party's control. Septels from Embassy Hanoi will discuss telecom sector and economic aspects of internet development in Vietnam. End Summary.

EXPLOSIVE INTERNET GROWTH

¶2. (SBU) According to official statistics, currently there are over three million Internet subscribers, including some 300,000 high-speed DSL subscribers. Introduced in Vietnam in mid-2003, growth in DSL use has increased by 300 percent from 2004 to ¶2005. Although demographic statistics are not available, it appears that the vast majority of internet users are the under-30 crowd, many of them teenagers.

¶3. (SBU) The vast majority of Vietnamese users access the internet via seemingly ubiquitous Internet kiosks. In HCMC metropolitan area alone there are about 2,000 Internet kiosks. There even are DSL-supported Internet kiosks in some of the secondary cities and towns in the Central Highlands. Our HCMC contacts in the industry say there are no ready, reliable statistics on the number of users in each province or geographic region of Vietnam. They estimate that, overall, at least 15 percent of Vietnam's 83 million persons presently have regular Internet access.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

¶4. (SBU) Vietnamese internet laws and regulations focus on "protecting" internet users from socially inappropriate web content and give legal authority to law enforcement agencies to oversee the internet and to firewall or stop any unwanted Internet traffic.

¶5. (SBU) Decree 55 of 2001 forbids all internet use either aimed at disrupting security, violating "social ethics and customs" or

opposing the government. Decree 55 authorizes the Ministries of Public Security, Culture and Information and Post and Telematics to introduce and enforce sub-legal documents on Internet control. In 2002, the Ministry of Culture and Information issued Decision 27, outlawing cyber content that "instigates the people against the government and sabotages the great national unity." This decision specifically forbids internet news outlets from publishing information running contrary to GVN guidelines.

¶6. (SBU) In July 2005, the Ministries of Public Security, Culture and Information and Post and Telematics issued "Inter-agency Circular 02," requiring Internet kiosks to store information on users, including their national ID card data, history of websites visited and e-mails for 30 days. The Circular prohibits minors under the age of 14 from visiting Internet kiosks without a parent. In November 2005, the National Assembly passed the Electronic Exchange Law, Article 49 of which gives GVN entities full access to computer networks, databases and electronic message traffic, as well as the authority to block computer networks.

Enforcement and Compliance: Physical and Virtual

¶7. (SBU) Every city and town has formed an "814 Inter-agency Control Team" (Doan kiem tra lien nganh 814), whose main task is to "fight social evils," including checking on internet kiosks' operations. A typical 814 Team often consists of policemen and local Party and government culture & information officials. According to an HCMC contact, there are police officers assigned at ward level to monitor internet kiosks.

¶8. (SBU) These efforts do not appear to have had a significant impact on internet kiosk operations thus far. Media reports and our own anecdotal experience show that internet kiosks do not maintain accurate logbooks and rarely ask internet users to present identification. Many internet kiosks in HCMC also offer private air conditioned rooms with webcams. These VIP rooms are

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often used to access sex, chat and online games sites. Restrictions required by Circular 02, if properly applied, would affect the number and frequency of guests, seriously cutting kiosk income.

¶9. (SBU) Our HCMC contacts say they know little about the breadth and sophistication of the technical effort to police the internet. One contact told us that a small unit of national security police is based at the HCMC General Post Office to check on internet traffic. Another contact told us that GVN authorities use applications that help identify individual subscribers, even if they use DSL with a dynamic Internet Protocol system. According to our contact, this enables the Internet monitor to know "who is doing what" on the internet. We also can infer from the case of the "PalTalk" Internet arrests in HCMC (Ref A) that police have agents posing as normal users to monitor activity on politically-linked internet sites. However, to our knowledge, the arrest of five to seven persons in the PalTalk case is the only incident in which police seemed able to track down supposedly anonymous users using Internet pseudonyms.

¶10. (SBU) Although the vast majority of Vietnamese users appear content to use the Internet for entertainment, for those interested in unfiltered news, GVN firewalls and online enforcement do not appear to be a significant obstacle -- at least thus far. For example, our contacts tell us that reporters in HCMC's state-controlled media routinely bypass firewalls to read blocked websites such as Radio Free Asia or Voice of America as well as other overseas Vietnamese sites, although they do not directly use information from banned sources.

DISSIDENTS AND INTERNET

¶11. (SBU) The increased availability and ease of access to the Internet has eased the burden of Vietnam's political and religious dissidents. They rely on the internet to coordinate and disseminate news and policy papers, obtain unfiltered information from the web and to inform the outside world quickly of any arrest or harassment involving their community. The Internet has helped empower and connect disparate dissidents groups in HCMC and Hue with their colleagues in Hanoi. For example:

-- Following the detention of HCMC-based dissident Do Nam Hai (aka Phuong Nam) in March (Ref B), digital copies of the arrest warrant were published within hours of his arrest on overseas Vietnamese websites.

-- In December 2005 leading political dissidents including HCMC-based Tran Khue and Hanoi-based Hoang Minh Chinh launched an on-line website called the "Democracy Movement." Hosted on a server based in the United States, the website was hacked within days of its inauguration before being restored and maintained with better security measures. The website currently operates normally, though accessing it from inside Vietnam requires knowing how to bypass the GVN's firewall (Ref C).

-- In early April, over 100 Vietnamese political and religious activists posted two declarations on democracy and freedom of association on the internet. One of declaration was initially drafted by Do Nam Hai in HCMC, but completed by dissident Catholic priest Nguyen Van Ly in Hue after police seized Hai's computer in March. A senior monk of the banned-Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam also signed the declarations. Do Nam Hai was able to e-mail his draft to Father Ly and some other dissidents across the country.

-- Roughly a month after his January release, Hanoi-based dissident Nguyen Khac Toan joined Do Nam Hai in an internet kiosk in Hanoi, where Hai instructed Toan how to bypass firewalls to read news from banned websites. Toan was one on the signatories of the "Democracy Movement."

¶12. (SBU) There also appears to be a link, albeit an unclear one, between active Party members -- or persons with Party links -- inside Vietnam and overseas Vietnamese websites opposed to the conservative wing of the Party. These websites routinely post apparently authentic internal Party and police documents as well as juicy political rumors.

ONLINE MEDIA

¶13. (SBU) Almost all HCMC-based newspapers have Vietnamese-language internet editions in Vietnamese. To date, Thanh Nien (Young People) is the only major HCMC-newspaper with an online English version; Saigon Giai Phong (Saigon

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Liberation), the Party's HCMC mouthpiece, is preparing to launch its own English-language web edition. Recently, HCMC's most progressive daily Tuoi Tre (Youth) announced plans to launch its own English online version. Vietnam also boasts two Internet-only news sites: "VNExpress" and "VietnamNet." VNExpress and VietnamNet are owned by State-owned internet companies. Media contacts tell us that on-line editions thus far are loss makers for the industry. However, newspaper management believe that they are "must-haves" to attract overseas Vietnamese readership and to keep up with competing newspapers. Interestingly, contacts at VietnamNet tell us that they are planning to start a print version of their online newspaper.

¶14. (SBU) Online newspapers are subject to the same Party and GVN censorship pressures that print media face (outlined Ref D). To launch an internet edition, newspapers must seek special permission from the Ministry of Culture and Information (MCI). In the case of Tuoi Tre, the MCI permit mandates that Tuoi Tre's

internet edition content must adhere to the paper edition. Because of pressure from the authorities, online newspapers review and censor readers' comments that are posted online. Many news-related forums state clearly in their "terms and conditions for membership" that no politically sensitive matters are to be discussed.

¶15. (SBU) However, in the run up to the Party Congress, Tuoi Tre Online, along with VietnamNet, has been as assertive as its print brother in the advocacy of a reformist agenda. For example, Tuoi Tre online edition gave an article calling for establishment of rule of law banner position on its site. (The same article received only inside-page placement in the print edition.) Tuoi Tre online and VietnamNet also showcased prominent reformists, such as Nguyen Trung, advisor to former Prime Minister Kiet. Both also posted readers' letters supporting calls for ideological and political reform (Refs E and F).

Yahoo and Google

¶16. (SBU) Yahoo and Google do not have offices or permits to operate in Vietnam. However, in late 2005, Yahoo! launched a Vietnamese language web page, set up by a Vietnamese Yahoo employee based in Singapore. The Yahoo! Vietnam site is hosted in Singapore. According to our media contacts, the Vietnamese employee has close relationship with Tuoi Tre online; consequently, Yahoo! struck a deal with Tuoi Tre to take daily news feeds from the Vietnamese newspaper for Yahoo!'s Vietnamese web page general news section.

¶17. (SBU) Beginning in 2004, Google launched a Vietnam-specific page to provide search results for Vietnamese-language information. The site will display links of banned websites such as RFA, but the Vietnamese firewall blocks access. To date, Google does not provide any other services in Vietnam. In February 2006, Google sent a specialist to Vietnam to explore market opportunities. Thanh Nien has registered its English web edition as a source for Google News on Vietnam.

BLOGS AND PUBLIC FORUMS

¶18. (SBU) It appears that blogging is increasingly popular among Vietnamese youth, particularly following Yahoo's introduction of its "360 Degrees" blog space in late 2005. Public forums, on the other hand, have been widely used in Vietnam since the late-1990s. Forums such as Tri Tue Viet Nam (Vietnamese Intellect) and Trai Tim Viet Nam (Vietnam's Heart) have now attracted tens of thousands of members both at home and abroad. Moderators in these forums generally ban or remove postings with political content. Thanh Nien Xa Me (Youth Away From Homes) -- a large and influential forum popular among young Vietnamese overseas students and intellectuals -- also steers clear of internal politics.

¶19. (SBU) The Internet in Vietnam also is home to smaller, specialized forums with a restrictive membership, often from one organization. An example is lamvuon.net (The Gardener), set up by officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Gardener features discussion topics on political reform, opinions on the coming 10th Party Congress, including a critical post on Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Nguyen Dzy Nien for being ineffective and taking bribes. These forums sometimes allow non-registered readers to post messages.

Comment

¶20. (SBU) The Party clearly recognizes that for Vietnam to

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develop into a modern industrialized state, it must have a robust Internet and an Internet-literate population. An indication of this thinking is Prime Minister Phan Van Khai's

call for 35 percent of Vietnamese to use the internet by 2010, a near tripling of current rates of use. At the same time, some Party members view uncontrolled access to information and increased freedom of expression as threats to their interests and the power of the Communist Party. In his keynote speech on the first day of the 10th Party Congress, Phan Dien, Standing Member of the Party Secretariat and conservative ideologue, warned that the Party "has been slow to develop appropriate solutions to control the Internet, while negative elements are taking advantage of this medium to fight aggressively against the Party." End Comment